

Victimisation in institutions

Thomas Görgen, Frank Neubacher and Daniela Hunold

With regard to two types of institutions—prisons and nursing homes—this chapter focuses upon victimisation of institutionalised populations and discusses potentials and challenges for research in this field. While residential institutions differ very much from each other, individual and organisational features that characterise them strongly support the need for victimological research. Standardised victimisation surveys, while usually being restricted to community-dwelling respondents, face specific challenges in institutional contexts.

This is immediately evident with regard to victimisations of residents in institutional long-term care. Although they are an especially vulnerable segment of the older population, access to nursing home residents via standardised surveys is limited due to the very physical and intellectual restrictions that are at the basis of nursing home placement. Research usually draws upon alternative methodological approaches such as surveys and interviews among nursing home staff or residents' relatives or analyses of data provided by authorities in charge of surveillance of institutional care of the elderly. Findings point to high victimisation rates and show a broad range of types of victimisations, including physical and sexual violence, verbal aggression and psychological mistreatment, neglect, and problematic types of restraint of residents' freedom. Residents are not only affected by abuse from staff. Resident-to-resident aggression appears to be widespread in institutions, and nurses are the target of physical violence, verbal aggression and sexual harassment by residents. Due to the institutional context, relationships and interactions in nursing homes are characterised by inequality and differential power. This provides the frame for conflict, which may lead to violent encounters. Beyond individual characteristics, institutional policies, e.g. regarding the use of restraints, are important determinants of potential for victimisation.

Violence among inmates of correctional institutions is a frequent phenomenon, especially in young offender institutions. Studies show that up to 50% of young inmates commit violent acts against other inmates; prevalence rates for bullying are even higher. Violent acts frequently take place in the prison cell and while inmates are out in the prison yard. Influences of the prison subculture reinforce the problem. Prisons are characterised by an accumulation of persons with a history of violence-related convictions. While such problems are brought into correctional facilities by the prisoners, the influence of the institution itself must not be disregarded. Studies show that inmates with a history of previous detention have a higher probability of being physically violent against fellow inmates, as well as committing acts of coercion and extortion. At the same time they feel more secure and have a lower risk of being attacked by others. This points to processes of habituation and learning with regard to violence. Violence is linked to deprivation among inmates (loss of autonomy, sexual deprivation, lack of security due to living in fear of being assaulted). Behaviour problems arise as a kind of attempt to compensate for everyday deprivation experienced under the conditions of being incarcerated. Studies also show that violence is linked to a lack of perceived procedural justice within the institution. This provides opportunities for violence prevention. Negative influences of the inmate subculture can be mitigated by inmates' trust in the correctional institution's problem-solving capacity. The transparency, equity and predictability of institutional procedures and decisions need to be augmented.

Victimisation rates are high in prisons and in institutions of residential care of the elderly. Both kinds of institutions are characterised by residents/inmates' limited opportunities to avoid victimisation risks. Up to now, institutions have rarely been the focus of victimisation surveys. This implies that some especially vulnerable populations are at risk of being neglected and ignored by victimological research. With regard to institutions such as nursing homes, obstacles for research are especially high, while—this becomes very clear for persons suffering from dementia—accessibility for research and vulnerability to victimisation are closely intertwined.